13-GS-45 Calling for an All Church Offering for Supporting the Educational Expenses of Members in Discernment Preparing for Authorized Ministry of the United Church of Christ

Report Submitted By: Rev. Dr. Carolyne Call, Chair of Financial Health in Ministry Task Force

In June 2013 at the 29th General Synod, a resolution came to the floor regarding the creation of a new all-church offering that would go toward reducing the financial difficulties of Members in Discernment, especially regarding educational costs. The discussion at that time was robust and the resolution passed, although two amendments were added. Implementation was assigned to the Collegium of Officers and General Synod requested a report by General Synod 2015. Between 2015 and 2019 the implementation of the resolution went through a series of discussions at the United Church of Christ Board and lost steam – in large part due to the daunting complexity of the issue as well as the difficulty of implementation across diverse conferences.

In 2017 the United Church of Christ Board appointed a new Task Force: The Members in Discernment Financial Support Task Force. Since 2017 the Task Force has delved into this issue, a complex one with many shifting variables. The direction of discussion shifted after the national Lilly Endowment First Fruits gathering in January of 2018. At that gathering we learned in painful detail of the depth and breadth of the financial struggles not only of Members in Discernment but also of a majority of our clergy as a whole. This is true across denominations. Financial stress is rampant and indebtedness is heavy (practically and psychologically) for many clergy – amplified by shame and isolation and silence. The Lilly Endowment is committed to meeting this challenge through robust, evidence-based programs enacted by denominations in their conferences, associations, partner organizations (such as the UCC Pension Boards, which has a program) and theological seminaries (all of which have programs).

The Task Force made a report to GS32 in Milwaukee in 2019 describing the progress made to that point and the myriad difficulties addressing the complexity of clergy debt concerns. A further report was promised for GS33.

In the intervening time the Pension Boards has developed and expanded their commitment to clergy debt assistance. In 2017, the Pension Boards created the Ministers’ Financial Vitality Initiative (MFVI) with a $1 million Lilly Endowment grant. According to the Pension Boards, “…the program has provided 90 UCC authorized ministers with personal financial skills and the
support of facilitated cohorts to address the burden of educational and consumer debt.” Further, in 2019, the Pension Boards was awarded a $1 million expansion grant from Lilly to build on the success of the initial grant and expand the reach of MFVI to as many as 500 clergy over the next five years.

In Fall 2020 the UCCB voted unanimously to disband the Task Force with the understanding that the Pension Boards would become the locus of UCC clergy debt relief efforts via the MFVI. The members of the Task Force felt gratified to see the concern taken seriously and the work carried forward by those with the resources to respond most appropriately.
Church Board, in covenant and cooperation with the Council of Conference Ministers and closely related seminaries, implement a Seminarian Fund Initiative to generate one million dollars per year for members in discernment seminarian scholarships.

The motion was seconded and Mr. Koepnick spoke to his motion.

Discussion on the amendment:
Andrew Warner (WISC) expressed the need to make this resolution explicit. Previous resolutions have requested action on this issue, but nothing has been accomplished. If we don’t address seminary debt, only the wealthy will become pastors.
Miguel Frias (ILL) requested clarification. The amendment proposed says seminary about three times. Does this only address seminarians and not lay leaders?
Jorge Bautista (CA NV, N) stated that his seminary education will end with a debt of over $100,000. He will take the risk for ministry because he truly feels called by God.
Brenda Brown (RM) feels the intent of the resolution is to put forward a commitment for theological education, not to micromanage the Collegium. Please reject the amendment and trust the Collegium to take this conversation seriously.
Mr. Herb Oliver (ME) called the question and the motion was seconded.

13-GS-42 VOTED: The Twenty-ninth General Synod votes to end debate on the amendment.

Alan Miller (PNE) requested the Moderator review this morning’s votes since some of the delegations just arrived. Moderator Tigner agreed.

13-GS-43 VOTED: The Twenty-ninth General Synod votes not to approve the amendment to Line 1151.

Bill Imes (LCM) called the question on the original motion, as amended.

13-GS-44 VOTED: The Twenty-ninth General Synod votes to close debate on the resolution Calling for All Church Offering for Supporting the Educational Expenses of Members in Discernment Preparing for Authorized Ministry of the United Church of Christ, as amended.

13-GS-45 VOTED: The Twenty-ninth General Synod votes to approve the resolution Calling for All Church Offering for Supporting the Educational Expenses of Members in Discernment Preparing for Authorized Ministry of the United Church of Christ, as amended.

CALLING FOR ALL CHURCH OFFERING FOR SUPPORTING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES OF MEMBERS IN DISCERNMENT PREPARING FOR AUTHORIZED MINISTRY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

WHEREAS, God provides for God’s church by calling and gifting persons for ministry in a variety of ways, including pastoral leadership for the church itself;
WHEREAS, the church participates in this providence of God by equipping and authorizing the
ministries of some of its called and gifted members through theological education and ordination
or commissioning;

WHEREAS, the well-being of the church of Jesus Christ, and particularly of each local church,
is enhanced by calling faithful, educated and competent pastors, teachers and other leaders, and
is jeopardized by the unavailability of such leadership;

WHEREAS, the church has historically provided for its leadership needs through institutions of
theological-pastoral education;

WHEREAS, General Synod III phased out national, direct support to seminaries and called upon
Conferences and local churches to assume this responsibility; and General Synod X urged each
local church to support the seven closely related (now the seven seminaries of the United Church
of Christ) seminary or seminaries in its region at a level equivalent to two percent of its operating
budget, but few local churches have done so;

WHEREAS, the cost of educating persons for ministerial leadership has gradually shifted from
the church itself to the persons themselves, and, inclusive of living expenses, has increased to
4,000 per year and more to many seminarians;

WHEREAS, many of the current generation of seminary graduates have borrowed large sums of
money—often $30,000 to $50,000 in addition to any undergraduate student loans still being
carried—to complete their theological education and one seminary’s average student loan for the
year 1996-97 alone was $10,200;

WHEREAS, indebted seminary graduates must seek starting salaries sufficient to enable debt
repayment on top of costs of living, while the salaries offered by many local churches are
marginal at best and inadequate to do so, and these local churches are increasingly hard-pressed
to finance even marginally-paid leadership;

WHEREAS, these trends point toward a dearth of church leadership, with only wealthy persons
being able to afford to answer God’s call to full-time leadership and only wealthy churches being
able to call them;

WHEREAS, the fund-raising efforts of the seminaries of the United Church of Christ and of the
Make A Difference Campaign, although providing some increase in scholarship resources, have
not been sufficient to stave off these trends;

WHEREAS, all the previous whereas clauses were taken directly from the action of the Twenty-
first General Synod “Prevention and Reduction of Seminarians’ Educational Debt” (97GS40)
and have not been sufficiently addressed;

WHEREAS, the multiple paths of ministry provide for greater diversity of educational
preparation but do not eliminate the need for financial support for members in discernment;
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Twenty-ninth General Synod of the United Church of Christ requests the Collegium of Officers of the United Church of Christ to develop a plan and an implementation schedule for an annual all-church offering or other possible funding initiatives to provide tuition assistance for theological education for members in discernment with associations of the United Church of Christ.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Twenty-ninth General Synod of the United Church of Christ recommends that the Collegium of Officers of the United Church of Christ explore the feasibility of offering low-interest loans to United Church of Christ members in discernment with a report delivered to the Thirtieth General Synod.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Collegium be requested to present an actionable plan as quickly as possible and no later than the Thirtieth General Synod in 2015.

FUNDING
Funding for the implementation of the resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

IMPLEMENTATION
The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

In compliance with the Standing Rules the following Minority Report was voted in Plenary 8.

MINORITY REPORT ON THE RESOLUTION CALLING FOR AN ALL CHURCH OFFERING FOR SUPPORTING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES OF MEMBERS IN DISCERNMENT PREPARING FOR AUTHORIZED MINISTRY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Many who opposed the resolution from Committee 5 did so because we desired a stronger response to the problem of seminarian debt, including a special offering. We call on all expressions of the United Church of Christ to faithfully engage this issue.

4. POINT OF PERSONAL PRIVILEGE
Norman Jackson (former Moderator) requested the United Church of Christ find resources for the development of American Indian pastors.

5. RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF OUTDOOR MINISTRIES OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Moderator Tigner called on Ms. Penny Lowes, Chairperson of the Executive Council, to introduce the resolution In Support of Outdoor Ministries of the United Church of Christ. On behalf of the Executive Council, Ms. Lowes moved adoption of the resolution In Support of Outdoor Ministries of the United Church of Christ and yielded her time to Ms. Ann Hughes (CONN) to speak to the resolution.